

I have cut and pasted below comments which I agree with wholeheartedly. I wanted to add my own deeply personal reasons for writing you.

I have worked as an interpreter for the Deaf for over 30 years. When I first started, telephone communications for the deaf consisted of using a TTY machine that was the size of a streetside mailbox and shook the house when it printed. Technology soon made TTYs much more portable. This seemed like a huge improvement was the best the Deaf could hope for, UNTIL VRS AND VIDEOPHONES!

I was at the point of burning-out in interpreting because of the frustration that I saw and subsequently suffered from through vicarious trauma for the inequities the Deaf people I know have to deal with daily. What saved my career and my life, literally, was starting to work for video relay services. FINALLY, Deaf people have access to telephonic communication EQUAL to that enjoyed by hearing people. FINALLY, Deaf people can communicate in THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, ASL, while using phone services. Imagine if you, as a non-Deaf person, would have to resort to using a second language every time that you wanted to use the phone! This is exactly what forcing Deaf people to use TTYs causes. I was brought to tears of joy to think that FINALLY the invention of Alexander Graham Bell's that was supposed to HELP the Deaf, and had only succeeded in isolating them more, could be used without frustration and with successful communication. TTY communication failed more often than not. FINALLY, the Deaf Culture was able to be incorporated through VRS interpreters, instead of being misunderstood through TTY relay operators who had not experienced Deaf Culture and its many nuances.

There are still many barriers to Deaf people in the world. Don't remove the one method where they have gained equal access by lowering rates paid to VRS and forcing a backslide into second-class citizenship for the Deaf.

There is a moral obligation to continue to support VRS at its present level and rates. The world, Deaf and hearing, are watching.

Below are the comments I have cut and pasted:

As an employee of a Video Relay Service (VRS) provider, I have the great fortune of assisting deaf individuals to communicate by videophone in American Sign Language using VRS. I have seen first-hand that this life-altering broadband service is a vital link that connects deaf people to the hearing community.

Ensuring that deaf individuals have access to VRS and encouraging improvements in VRS should be

a high priority for you as Chairman and Commissioners of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires the FCC to make available to all deaf individuals nationwide ?functionally-equivalent? communications.

You will soon determine the future of VRS. When you set the VRS rate, you will determine whether America makes progress toward the statutory goals of functional equivalence, nationwide access and inclusion ? or force deaf users to revert to TTY communications. And, you will determine whether VRS fulfills its potential to drive broadband adoption by the deaf, even in the face of poverty and isolation.

I was deeply disturbed to see the Commission?s recent Public Notice on VRS rates. These proposals would put an end to VRS as we know it. My employer has already informed me that if these proposed rates are adopted, our company would head into bankruptcy. This would be disastrous for deaf VRS users.

The FCC should be increasing the availability and use of VRS, not cutting back. You should adopt a rate that encourages continuing improvements in VRS technology and continues to improve services levels. Recent developments in VRS are a good example of how the service can be improved, such as enhanced 911 services, 10-digit numbering, a larger and better-trained pool of interpreters and better videophones with an array of enhanced features. Monthly payments for broadband are a prohibitive expense for many deaf people, and instead of trying to cut back on VRS, you should be exploring ways to make VRS over broadband more affordable to deaf individuals.

Progress towards functional equivalence will be destroyed if the FCC does not encourage VRS providers to improve VRS and make it more widely available. VRS is a recent and dramatic advancement that benefits those who are deaf, but so much more can be done. It would be tragic if the FCC were to destroy this broadband service that is so vital to the deaf.

Recent reports of fraud in the VRS industry are disturbing to employees who work for a company that has operated within current FCC guidelines and has worked to maintain the integrity of the VRS fund. The FCC must devote more of its time and energy to focusing on the elimination of fraud.

I urge you to establish a fair and predictable rate for VRS that will encourage VRS providers to invest in improving VRS and reaching more deaf individuals. The law requires it and it is the right thing to do.

Sincerely,
Adelaide Davis
Interpreter and Ally

For and of the Deaf